

Sermon on the Mount

Message 5

Jesus' Kingdom and God's Law

Matthew 5:17-20

The Necessity of Law

Did your Dad ever irritate you by saying as you left on a date, “Be sure to be home by 11:00”? How about when you were younger and your Mom refused to let you watch TV until you finished your homework? Do you ever get annoyed that it is illegal at your age to have a beer, even if you only want one or two and don't get drunk? Does it frustrate you that you God says you can't have sex until you're married? If you're like the rest of us, rules and restrictions don't thrill you. In fact, if you're a normal human being, you tend to resent limitations on your freedom. Liberty has an exciting ring to it that law and order can't match.

Do you know how you can tell whether a roadkill is a deer or a lawyer? If it's a deer, it has skid marks in front of it! Why have some labs begun using lawyers for tests instead of rabbits? Three reasons – it's more humane, they're more plentiful, and their keepers don't get attached to them! Why are lawyer jokes so plentiful? I know some lawyers, and they are actually nice people. In fact, some of my best friends are lawyers. I think there are several reasons for the popularity of lawyer jokes, but one of them is that we transfer our natural dislike of law onto those who deal in the law.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we were free from all laws? Imagine a land where there were no lawyers or politicians or taxes or zoning regulations – a land where others could do what they want to you and get away with it! Much as we hate laws in general, and certain ones in particular – a lawless society is impossible and undesirable. You can get a glimpse of such a life by reading the early chapters of Genesis. Murder, rape, theft, and all sorts of crimes were commonplace. The earth before the flood was like the worst of our urban slums. Finally God said, “The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with violence through them; and behold, I will destroy them with the earth.” (Genesis 6:13) When there were no laws and no human government, violence was an everyday experience. This is still true, as you can see today in places where government has broken down. Iraq and Palestine are glaring examples of what happens when people refuse to live by law. The law-free utopia of Rousseau is indeed “no place” (which is what utopia means), for no such place ever existed, or ever can exist among sinful men. Much as we hate to admit it, we need laws and government to have a peaceful life.

Oddly, although most people will concede this point, many Christians chaff at the idea that the Kingdom of God should have laws. The rigidity of law conflicts with the tenderness of the gospel; the threat of law clashes with the comfort of eternal life; the coldness of law opposes the love of Jesus. At a visceral level we recoil from the notion that God rules Jesus' Kingdom by laws. We thought the gospel ushered us into a life of freedom and the love of God. We didn't expect to be tied down to following a bunch of rules. Furthermore, doesn't scripture itself say that the gospel has replaced the law? Galatians 4:5, for example, says, “when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.” That's the idea! We have been redeemed from the law. Now we are no longer slaves, but sons. Later Paul says, “if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.” (Galatians 5:18) This is what we were after all along, isn't it – the freedom of the Spirit instead of slavery to the law. And finally, perhaps some of you here have vivid, painful memories of personal failure to keep God's law. Perhaps you tried, and failed, to love your neighbors, honor your parents, avoid drunkenness, and remain sexually pure. Perhaps the only thing that saved you from a life of misery and repeated failure was the gospel. So you may understandably resist the idea that law has a place in Jesus' Kingdom.

But tonight we encounter a problem of huge proportions. Jesus, when He had a chance to make all this clear, unambiguously sided with the law. In the scripture we just read He said, “I did not come to destroy the law.” He said further that even the smallest letter of the law is important – and that to be great in His Kingdom you must not only *keep* the law, but teach others to keep it too. The crowning touch of this distressing speech is His statement that to enter His Kingdom, you must keep the law better than the best people of His day. This seems completely to contradict Jesus’ message elsewhere. Remember His parable about the two men who went to the temple and prayed – the Pharisee and the tax collector? (Luke 18:9-14) The point was that the sinful (i.e. law-breaking) tax collector was welcomed by God because of his faith, but the righteous (i.e. law-keeping) Pharisee was rejected. And isn’t this the whole point of the gospel – that God saves sinful men through faith, apart from obedience to the law? So why in the world does Jesus say here that you must keep the law better than the Pharisees in order to enter His Kingdom?

The Law Fulfilled

The decisive sentence in this passage is at the end of verse 17: “I did not come to destroy, but to fulfill.” The meaning of the overall passage hinges on the meaning of the word fulfill. Many people take “fulfill” to mean throw away. We might say a soda can has fulfilled its purpose when we have consumed all its contents, so we throw it away. Likewise, after Christ came the law had fulfilled its purpose and was no longer necessary. This fits wonderfully with Paul’s teaching in Galatians, especially where he says the law was like a tutor to lead us to Christ. Paul said that just as an adult no longer needs a tutor, neither do we any longer need the law. And if we think about the particulars of the law, the sacrifices and the ceremonies all were designed to show us the need for a sacrifice and a savior because of our sins. Surely since Jesus came as the perfect sacrifice and the ultimate savior, there would be no necessity for these laws. And sure enough, the book of Hebrews makes this point exactly, at great length and with great emphasis. The idea here is that it’s as if the law had an expiration date on it, and when Jesus came it just naturally had no further use.

All this makes sense to a point, and it is an extremely common view these days. It fits with Paul’s teaching, it fits with the rest of Jesus’ teaching, and it sits well with us. But the problem is, it doesn’t sit well with the previous clause in this verse. At root, this view really says that Jesus destroyed the law – at least in any practical sense – and that is explicitly what He denied doing! Whatever it means to fulfill the law, it can’t mean it is thrown out, or expired, or finished – or any other synonym for destroy.

A better approach is to notice that fulfill means to “fill full”, i.e. to do something completely, as opposed to partly. The idea here is that previously the law was partly obeyed, but now it will be completely obeyed. Israel offered sacrifices, but as Hebrews says, the blood of goats and bulls could never take away sin. Now Jesus offers the perfect sacrifice – what the law expected all along. But what of the other laws, the laws that pertain to everyday morality? Well, Jesus kept those, too. The Israelites tried, and failed, to keep the moral laws, but Jesus lived a perfect life. As Paul said in Galatians, Jesus was “born under the law”, and He kept all the laws for us. By faith in Him, we get the credit for His perfect life. So the law was fulfilled when Jesus kept it perfectly for us, thus relieving us of the necessity of keeping it too. Again this is true, as far as it goes. But it runs smack into the whole rest of this chapter in which Jesus lays out in detail how we are to keep these laws – now! No, there is no way around it. Jesus really is teaching us here that the law must be fulfilled in our daily lives – as in we must keep, obey, follow, etc. all that it says. Tough as it may sound, to conclude anything else is to be unfaithful to what Jesus actually said.

To further complicate matters, Jesus not only pounded this point home in the following verses, He concluded in verse 20 by requiring those in His Kingdom to keep the law better than those notorious law-keepers – the scribes and Pharisees. The scribes were so called because they could read and write, and thus became the experts in the law. The Pharisees were the religious conservatives of their day. They were the

don't drink, smoke, or dance crowd of the first century. Both groups were impeccably scrupulous in keeping the law. In another place Jesus said they even gave a tenth of their garden herbs to God. And now Jesus requires His followers to outdo the best of the best. It seems a hopeless command.

Law and Gospel

If this is the case, if we are obligated to keep the whole law, and perfectly too, what became of the gospel? How do we square this passage with all the passages that teach salvation by faith in Christ? This question gets at the essential nature of the Sermon on the Mount. Remember what we said the first week of these studies? This sermon is Jesus' vision of His Kingdom. Here He is teaching us how His people will live. The whole point of this sermon is how to live as a follower of Jesus, not how to *become* a follower of Jesus. Actually, He did touch on this. Remember the first beatitude? "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." This is the entrance requirement. You get *into* Jesus' Kingdom by admitting your failure, your sinfulness. This was the point in Luke's parable we mentioned earlier. The sinful tax collector was welcomed into Jesus' Kingdom because he confessed his sin and entrusted Himself to God's mercy. The Pharisee was excluded because he refused to confess his sin. He trusted in his own ability to keep the law. But no one is capable on his own of obeying God's law – not even the wonderfully good Pharisees. We all fail. But Jesus is merciful and welcomes all your failures when you admit your need of a savior and seek Him to rescue you. This is the gospel: God saves sinners – and He will save you if you cry to Him for mercy.

So the Sermon on the Mount is about how to live in God's Kingdom, and Jesus says that entails keeping the law. What do we do then with those passages which say the law has been superseded?

As we have seen already, Paul's letter to the Galatians contains some of the most anti-law passages in the Bible. It's easy to take these verses out of context and show that the law has no place in the life of the Christian. But taken *in* context, they do nothing of the sort. The problem in the Galatian church – and the whole issue in this book – is confusion about the *foundation* of their salvation. Paul attacks the problem head-on at the beginning of chapter three.

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?

Galatians 3:1-3

You see here how passionate Paul is on this subject! If the Galatians are depending on the wrong thing for their salvation, they will not be saved at all. Now what does Paul contrast with the works of the law? It's faith. And what does he set against the Spirit? It's the flesh. The issue here is not whether the Galatians are following the ten commandments or not – it's that they are trying to please God in their own strength. That's what he means by the flesh – human ability. Somehow they got the idea that the Christian life is doing good deeds in your own power – and Paul is violently denying that. The Christian life consists of trusting Jesus, living by faith. We don't have the power to do good, so we look to Christ and trust Him to enable us to obey Him. The point is not whether the law has a role in our lives now – the point is that the law has no power to enable us to obey God. Only the gospel has that kind of power, and we are able to obey Jesus only by placing our trust in Him.

Law and Spirit

Paul proceeds to explain the real purpose of the law. God's promise to save His people preceded the

law by 400 years. He added the law because Israel was immature – they didn't naturally know how to please God. So just as a child needs detailed instructions, God's people also needed detailed laws. But when a child grows up, he no longer needs such close supervision. Likewise, when God's people became mature at the coming of Christ, we no longer need close regulation. But what does that mean regarding the law? Well, when you grow up, you no longer need your parents to tell you to watch before you cross the street, brush your teeth, and do your homework. So do you therefore do anything you want? Certainly you have the freedom to do so. But that violates the whole point of your childhood training. When you become an adult you are no longer tied to your parents, because we expect you to do naturally what your parents had to force you to do. The essence of maturity is self-discipline, and the man or woman who fails to follow his parents' teaching will live a miserable life. The same is true of the Christian life. Israel was the immature form of the church. Now God's people are grown up. There is no longer any legal requirement binding us, but we are expected to have learned to keep God's law naturally. And if we don't, we *will* get into heaven, but there will be hell to pay here on earth.

But what of Paul's statement that we are no longer under the law? In Galatians 5:18 he says, "If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law." It's true, we are no longer living *under* the law, but that does not mean the law has no place in our lives. Israel was *under* the law in that they were subject to its curse – but Galatians 3:13 says, "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us..." Jesus took our place on the cross and received the curse which was the penalty for our sins. Now the law has no power to curse those who believe in Christ. Furthermore, Israel was *under* the law in that it was an unbearable burden. In Acts 15 Peter said, "Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?" (Acts 15:10) But John said God's commands are not burdensome (1 John 5:3b). We have been relieved of this great burden.

Well, how, you might ask, are we to keep the law as Jesus says, yet not find it a burden? How are we different than the Israelites? The key difference is the Spirit. In Galatians 5:18 Paul said, "If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law," but how does the Spirit lead us? By the law! Many people think of living by the Spirit as a sort of anything-goes spirituality. But God says that the work of His Spirit is to lead us in keeping the law! He promised this way back in Ezekiel when He said, "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them." (Ezekiel 36:27) You see? God gives us His Spirit, and the presence of His Spirit makes us keep His laws. God explained how this works in Jeremiah, where He said, "I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts." (Jeremiah 31:33) God transforms our minds and our hearts. The work of His Spirit is to make us think differently, and feel differently. Far from separating us from the law, God's Spirit causes us to *love* His law, to *want* to obey His commands, to *eagerly* choose to do His will. By the Spirit we fulfill Psalm 119:97, "Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day."

Jesus said, "I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven." The good news is this: you shall! You *shall* keep the law better than the most religious people of Jesus' day. What you cannot do by yourself, Jesus will do by His Spirit. He will take poor, sinful, rebellious you, give you a love for His law, and enable you to keep it – if you trust Him. But you must trust Him. If you leave here tonight thinking, "David is right, I must obey God's law," you will fail because you cannot keep God's law in your own power. If you leave here tonight thinking, "David is wrong. The law is no longer relevant," you will fail to live like a member of Jesus' Kingdom. Instead you must say, "I am way too sinful to keep God's law. But I believe that Jesus will make me able to keep it. Thank you Jesus for giving me your Spirit to lead me into obedience."

All this hinges on knowing Jesus. If you do not know Him, you are not a member of His Kingdom,

so trying to live like a Christian is pointless for you. But good morals will not save you from death. Learn from the tax collector. Come to Jesus and ask Him to have mercy on you and forgive you of your sins.

Next week we will begin to hear Jesus' explanation of how His followers should keep His law, and if you are willing to listen and obey, Jesus will make you able. Amen!

C. David Green
Lehigh University
October 3, 2006